"The Feelings Immediately Consequent Upon Stating the Case": Conduct in the Regency Applied to All

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This portrait by G. M. Woodward (Curtesy 1797) is actually two images on a single plate, satirizing with some remarkable detail the extent complexity of the manners and politeness that most people were expected to know. The top shows two men bowing to one another at a prescribed angle to indicate their social statues in reference to each other. The bottom shows similar rules for the curtseys of the women and their social relationship. The precise angles of the bows and curtseys may or may not be recorded as numbers within the drawing itself, but the satire of manners shown here is made plain by the lines and facial expressions of the characters. Even in the Regency people knew that standards of conduct were so outrageous and complex that they made fun of them with works of art such as this.

And yet, while we think of the standards of conduct in the Regency being especially hard on women, historical documents such as John Akin's Letters From a Father to his Son concerning a multitude of topics also addressed proper conduct not just for women or for men but for all people. Akin assumes that when young people are keen on receiving the truth and accurately perceiving what is placed before them, "a question of moral conduct is almost always best decided by the feelings immediately consequent upon stating the case" (235). This means that when someone is accurately perceiving what is before them, they can be trusted to allow their feelings to determine the best course of behavior. Perception of what is before them is readily available among the characters of Pride and Prejudice, such as soon after Lydia's wedding when Jane attempts to make herself and others believe that she has no desire to see Mr Bingley when he arrives and that it makes no difference to her. "In spite of what her sister declared, and really believed to be her feelings, in the expectation of his arrival, Elizabeth could easily perceive that her spirits were affected by it. They were more disturbed, more unequal, than she had often seen them" (Austen 373). Jane later confides in Elizabeth, and all the while Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Bennet are arguing on the etiquette of whether or not Mr. Bingley should be coming to visit and whether they should wait on him at all. Elizabeth does her best to console her sister but when Mr. Bingley arrives and she sees that he's brought Mr. Darcy with him, she and Jane face the same predicament together and behave much the same way. It is because their perception of the situation is forming their decisions and actions that they do what they do. They are behaving in a way that reflects the Regency's belief that a person's perception of truth will tell them how to act in any given circumstance.